

WHEN THE ANTS CAME

By CARL STEPHENSON

This unusual story from the wilds of Brazil, written by a Viennese author in 1937, gives a powerful picture of the struggle between the few and the many. Although it has already appeared in America in an English translation, we are presenting it in this new and condensed translation in our magazine as one of the best German short stories of the last few years.—K.M.

"IF the brutes keep on their present course, and there is no reason why they shouldn't, they'll be all over your plantation by the day after tomorrow at the very latest."

Leiningen sucked placidly at a cigar about the size of a corn-cob; he gazed at the agitated District Commissioner for several seconds. At last he took the cob out of his mouth. With his bristly gray hair, his bulky nose, the untouched and untouchable look of his light eyes, he resembled a scrappy old eagle. "Nice of you to come all the way up here just to warn me. But you don't seriously mean that I should run away from the ants?"

The Brazilian Commissioner threw up his long arms and clawed the air with wildly distended fingers. "My God! Leiningen! I guess you don't know these devils! They're not animals which one can fight—they are an 'act of God!' Ten miles long, two miles wide—ants, nothing but ants! They'll eat a full-grown buffalo down to the bone before you can spit three times."

The German grinned. "I know them well enough. 'Act of God!' When I began this model farm three years ago, I took everything into account that could possibly happen. I'm ready for anything—even your ants."

The Brazilian rose heavily. "Your obstinacy endangers not only yourself, but the lives of your four hundred workers. I wish you luck, but I don't believe you'll have any. You don't know these ants!"

Leiningen accompanied him down to the river, where the Government steamer was moored.

The reported enemy was by no means unfamiliar to the planter. Before he started work on his settlement, he had lived long

enough in the country to see for himself the fearful campaigns of devastation wrought by these ravenous insects. But he had planned his measures of defense accordingly. So far he had successfully warded off all such "acts of God" as drought, flood, plague—unlike his fellow-settlers in the district, who had made little or no resistance. His motto was: The human brain is stronger than the elements; it need only become fully aware of its powers.

That same evening, Leiningen assembled his workers. He did not want to wait till the news of the threatening invasion reached their ears from other sources. Most of them were natives of that district; the cry "The ants are coming!" was identical to them with instant, headlong flight, a race for one's bare life. But so great was the Indians' trust in Leiningen, in Leiningen's word, and in Leiningen's wisdom, that they received his curt tidings and his orders for the imminent struggle with the same calm with which they were given; unafraid and alert, as if they had been promised a new kind of game, a new competition or hunt. The ants were indeed mighty, but not so mighty as the boss. Let them come!

THEY came at noon two days later. Their approach was announced by the wild unrest of the horses, which must have scented from afar the exhalation of danger and which were scarcely controllable in stables or under their riders. It was announced by a stampede of animals: jaguars and pumas flashing by, nimble stags of the pampas and bulky tapirs, no longer hunters but themselves hunted; maddened herds of cattle thundering along with heads lowered, nostrils snorting; small monkeys chattering in a dementia of terror. They were followed by the creeping and jumping

denizens of bush and steppe, big and little rodents, snakes, and lizards. Pell-mell the rabble swarmed down the hill to the plantation, scattering right and left before the barrier of the water-filled ditch and hurrying on toward the river where, again balked, they fled along its bank.

This ditch was one of the defense measures which Leiningen had long since prepared against the advent of the ants. Twelve feet across, the ditch encompassed the plantation, starting at the river which bordered it to the north and debouching into it again below the plantation near Leiningen's house. Leiningen had constructed a dam by which water from the river could be diverted into the ditch. The water had been let in, so that now an imposing girdle of water, a huge quadrilateral with the river as its base, completely surrounded the settlement. Unless the ants were clever enough to build rafts, they would hardly be able to reach the plantation.

The women and children and the herds of cattle were taken to the other side of the river. Finally Leiningen made a careful inspection of the "inner moat," a smaller ditch lined with concrete which extended around the hill on which stood the ranch house, barns, and stables. Into this concrete ditch led the inflow pipes from three great kerosene tanks.

Leiningen stationed his men at irregular intervals along the water ditch, the first line of defense. Then he lay down in his hammock, puffing drowsily at his cigar and waiting for developments. When a messenger came with a report that the ants had been sighted coming from the south, he mounted his horse, which at the feel of its master seemed to forget its uneasiness, and rode leisurely in the direction of the threatening offensive. The southern ditch, the upper side of the quadrilateral, was a little over two miles long. This was the scene of the first act of the war between Leiningen's brain and twenty square miles of life-destroying ants.

It was a sight one could never forget when a black fringe covered the tops of the green hills along the southern ditch. The nearer the mass approached—and it approached at an uncanny speed—the more clearly could one see the high green grass of the rich pastureland toppling and disappearing as if it were being mown by an invisible giant sickle.

Even Leiningen, who had ridden up just in time to restore his men's loss of heart by a display of unshakeable calm, could not quite conquer a disagreeable feeling: yonder were a few billions of voracious jaws bearing down upon him, and only a narrow ditch—which all of a sudden seemed very inadequate—lay between him and his men being gnawed to the bone, "before he could spit three times."

One could not help but admire the orderly formation in which the hostile army was approaching. No human battalions, however well drilled, could ever hope to rival the precision of that advance. The foremost front reached the obstacle of the ditch almost simultaneously in one straight line. As soon as the ants had informed themselves of the nature of this obstacle from the reports of scouts—which took place very quickly—the army divided up. The two wings marched toward the side ditches. This out-flanking maneuver took more than an hour to accomplish; no doubt the ants expected to find a means of crossing at some point. During this time the enemy on the central, the southern front remained perfectly still. The besieged were almost able to contemplate at their leisure the thumb-long, roddish-black, long-legged insects; they clearly saw the coldly shining eyes intent upon them and the razor-edged mandibles of this host of infinity—or at least they thought they saw them. Now both Leiningen's brain and the more primitive brains of the Indians and the mestizos sensed that inside every single one of that deluge of insects dwelt a thought. And that thought was: Ditch or no ditch, we'll get your flesh yet!

It was four o'clock in the afternoon before the hostile wings reached the ends of the ditch and thus the river. By some kind of mysterious telegraphy, the report must have spread very swiftly along the entire enemy line. Would the lack of any possibility of crossing cause the ants to abandon the plantation and to turn toward spoils more easily attainable? If the planter had nurtured any such hope, he was soon to be disillusioned. Attracted by the screams of some of the sentries to the central part of the southern ditch, he saw a flood of ants, about a hundred yards in width, pouring in an immense glistening black cataract down the slope of the ditch and mingling with the dirty water. Soon many thousands were drowning in the sluggish flow, but they were followed by troop after troop who clambered

over their sinking comrades and then themselves served as bridges for others following behind them.

Near Leiningen a few mounted herdsmen awaited his orders. He sent one of them to the upper weir of the river: the river was to be dammed more strongly to increase the speed and power of the water flowing through the ditch. A second peon was dispatched to fetch spades and kerosene sprinklers.

The ants were approaching across the water more quickly than Leiningen had deemed possible. Impelled by the mighty cascade behind them, they came closer and closer to the threatened inner bank. Every creature that drifted off or sank was replaced by dozens of others. Leiningen had to admit to himself that it was a stroke of luck that the ants were attempting the crossing on a comparatively short front. Had they assaulted simultaneously along the entire length of the ditch, the outlook for the defenders would have been black indeed. Even as it was, it could hardly be described as rosy. But the nearer the danger approached, the less did the German seem to be aware that death in a gruesome form was drawing closer. The shadow of threatening annihilation paled before the fact that the war between his brain and the "act of God" was reaching its climax. Such, indeed, was the suggestive power of his reckless confidence that the Indians forgot their instinctive fear.

The kerosene sprinklers arrived, sprinklers hitherto used to destroy pests and blights and which were now filled with kerosene. Streams of the evil-smelling oil poured out over the enemy.

The ants responded to these defensive measures by increasing the vigor of their offensive. Whole clumps of crawling insects began to roll down the opposite bank; at the same time Leiningen noticed that the front of attack was widening visibly. As the numbers both of his men and of his sprinklers were limited, this constant extension of the line of battle represented a particular danger. Here and there dark ribbons were already mounting the inner bank. The file of defenders was too sparse in comparison to the close ranks of the opponent. Though his men toiled like madmen, the situation was becoming more and more perilous.

One of the herdsmen struck with his spade at an enemy clump. He did not draw it back quickly enough from the water

—in a trice the wooden shaft swarmed with insects scurrying upwards. With a curse the man flung the spade into the ditch. Too late—some of the ants had already reached his body. They lost no time; wherever they encountered bare flesh they bit deeply and locked their devilish jaws. A few of them, bigger than the others, carried in their hindquarters a sting which injected a burning and paralyzing venom into their victim. Screaming, frantic with pain, the peon danced and twirled like a dervish. Leiningen's voice outyelled the screaming of the bitten man. "Into the kerosene, you fool!" he roared. "Off with your shirt! Dip your paws in the kerosene!" His words were obeyed. But even then the fierce mandibles did not let go; another peon had to help the victim squash and detach each separate insect.

Leiningen surveyed his position. A dispassionate observer might have estimated the odds against him at a thousand to one. But then such an onlooker would have reckoned only with the capabilities of several billion ants and not with those inherent in a man's brain. Leiningen had not erred when he had decided to avail himself of the elements: the water in the ditch was beginning to rise. The speed and power of the flowing water increased, swirling into quicker and quicker movement the living black carpet, carrying away parts of it along the hastening current.

The ants on the opposite bank ceased their cataract as if they had become aware of the impossibility of attaining their aim in this way. They withdrew to the upper edge of the ditch. All the troops so far hurled into the water had sacrificed themselves in vain. Countless drowned or drowning insects drifted along with the current. The news ran swiftly along the entire chain of sentries. The men boisterously celebrated their triumph—as if there were no longer billions of merciless cold and hungry eyes watching them from the opposite bank, watching and waiting.

The sun sank behind the forest, and twilight fell. It was not only hoped but expected that the ants would remain quiet until dawn. Moreover, the current in the ditch had become so fast that it was bound to frustrate any attempted crossing. Leiningen ordered his men to camp along the bank overnight; two of his motorcars were to patrol until morning along the ditch and illuminate the surface of the water with

their headlights. Having thus taken all necessary and possible precautions the planter ate his supper with considerable appetite and went to bed. His slumbers were in no wise disturbed by the memory of the waiting twenty square miles.

MORNING came and found a thoroughly refreshed and active Leiningen riding along the ditch. The planter studied the motionless, unaltered throng of besiegers. He had ridden along the eastern and southern sections of the ditch and found everything in order. But along the western section, which ran beside a forest, he found the enemy very busy indeed. The trunks and branches of the trees and the creepers of the lianas on the far bank of the ditch fairly swarmed with industrious insects. But they were not eating the leaves then and there. They were gnawing through the stalks; a thick green shower of leaves was falling steadily to the ground. Leiningen thought at first that they were victualing columns sent out to obtain fodder for the rest of the army. But then all at once he realized the aim that rain of green was intended to serve.

Each single leaf, pulled and pushed by dozens of toiling insects, was borne straight to the edge of the ditch. Leiningen was forced to admit to himself that the situation was now far more ominous than that of the day before. He had thought it impossible for the ants to build rafts—well, here they were, enough of them to bridge the ditch.

Leaf after leaf rustled down the slope into the water; the current drew them away from the bank and carried them into mid-stream. And every single leaf carried several ants.

The sporting zest with which the excitement of the previous day had inspired Leiningen had now vanished; in its place was a cold and violent determination. He would send these vermin back to the hell where they belonged, somehow! Of course, this "how" was at the moment the greatest problem. He had underrated the enemy—now he would have to see how to cope with him.

The number of floating leaves was increasing swiftly; it could not be long now before the whole mile-long stretch of water was spanned by the green pontoon over which the ants could move more or less as they liked. The air rang with the curses of

bitten Indians. They had removed their shirts and pants, the more quickly to detect the upward-crawling ants; wherever they saw one they crushed it. For the time being this defense was still possible, as long as the insects arrived singly. Additional help was given by the man at the weir intermittently lowering the water level in the ditch and then suddenly flooding it with a tidal wave which washed away the enemy vanguard.

While the besieged were directing their attention and strength at the defense of the forest section, the seemingly unaffected line above the wood, where there were no leaf pontoons, became the theater of decisive action. Here the defenders' front was sparse and scattered; everyone who could be spared had hurried away to the south. Into the bed of the ditch here an irresistible throng poured unexpectedly at a moment when the level of the water was low. Rushing across the ditch they attained the inner bank before the slow-witted Indians had fully grasped the situation. Their frantic screams puzzled the man at the weir. Before he could direct a new flood from the river into the safeguarding bed, he saw himself surrounded by raging ants. He ran like the others, ran for his life.

When Leiningen heard this he knew that the plantation was doomed. He wasted no time bemoaning the inevitable. As long as there was the slightest chance of success, he had defended his soil; now any further hesitation was both useless and fatal. He fired three revolver shots into the air—the prearranged signal for his men to retreat instantly within the "inner moat." Then he rode toward the ranch house.

This was a couple of miles from the point of invasion. Of the three kerosene tanks at the back of the house, one had already been half emptied by the constant withdrawals needed for the sprinklers. The remaining kerosene now flowed through subterranean pipes into the concrete trench surrounding the house and the stables.

One after the other, Leiningen's men came running up. One could see that their belief in a favorable outcome of the battle was considerably shaken. The planter assembled the peons around him.

"Well, lads," he began, "we've lost the first round. But we'll beat them yet, don't you worry. Those who think otherwise can draw their pay and push off; the rafts are ready on the river, and there's plenty of time to reach them."

No one stirred. Leiningen acknowledged this silent vote of confidence with a satisfied laugh.

The bridges over the concrete ditch were removed. Here and there an ant came to the edge of the ditch, gazed at the kerosene meditatively, and turned back again. Apparently they had little interest at the moment in what lay beyond the evil-reeking barrier; the abundant spoils of the plantation seemed more attractive. Soon the trees, shrubs, and beds for miles around were shrouded with ants, busily gobbling the yield of long months of strenuous toil. As twilight began to fall, a cordon of ants marched up to the kerosene trench but remained passive. Leiningen posted sentries with electric torches and withdrew to his room. He considered various schemes by which he would be able to increase the future yield of his plantation to enable him before long to make up for the damage he was now suffering. Having arrived at a satisfactory result, he went to bed and slept deeply until morning.

THE third day of siege dawned. When Leiningen stepped onto the roof terrace of his house at sunrise, he was greeted by a fantastic sight: for miles in every direction there was nothing but a black multitude, a multitude of rested, sated, but none the less voracious ants; as far as the eye could see there was nothing but that crawling flood.

At first it seemed that the kerosene would serve its purpose. The besiegers sensed the peril of swimming in it and made no move to plunge into the ditch. Instead they began to throw shreds of wood, twigs, and dried leaves into the kerosene. Everything green which could have been similarly used had long since been eaten. After a time, though, a long procession could be seen, bringing from the west the tamarind leaves used as rafts the day before.

Since the kerosene, unlike the water in the outer ditch, was perfectly still, the twigs, leaves, and other refuse piled up along the outer bank. It was several hours before the ants succeeded in covering an appreciable part of the surface. So far they had been satisfied with throwing down objects which would float; now they proceeded to a direct attack. Their troops swarmed down the concrete side; arriving on the supporting surface, they dragged small bits of it to the

edge and in this way gradually approached the other side.

During all this time the planter watched them with interest and without taking action; he had also ordered his men not to disturb the ants. So the peons squatted idly along the edge of the ditch and waited for a sign from the boss. Finally, the time for action seemed to have come: the kerosene was covered with ants, and the first of them were landing on the inner bank.

"Everyone stand back from the ditch!" commanded Leiningen. The men stepped back without the slightest idea what the boss had in mind. Leiningen stooped forward and leisurely dropped a stone into the ditch which split the floating carpet and its living freight, revealing a patch of kerosene. A match spurted, drifted down to the oily surface, and Leiningen jumped back: in a flash a towering rampart of fire encompassed the garrison.

This spectacular inspiration, which the Indians had not expected, threw them into ecstasies. They clapped their hands and yelled. It was some time before the kerosene burned down to the bottom and the wall of smoke and fire disappeared which Leiningen had raised between the besieged and the besiegers. The ants had retreated in a wide circle from the scene of devastation.

Yet the perseverance of the creatures was not yet broken; indeed, every setback seemed only to whet it. The concrete had cooled, the glow of the burned flotilla had gone out, and the kerosene from the second tank was rising in the ditch, when the ants advanced for a new attack. The foregoing scene was repeated in every detail, except that on this occasion far less time was needed to bridge the ditch since the kerosene was now already covered by a film of ashes. Once again thousands upon thousands of ants perished in the flames. Once again they withdrew; once again kerosene flowed into the ditch. Weren't the brutes ever going to stop this senseless self-sacrifice? It was senseless, wasn't it? Well, yes—it would have been senseless if the defenders had had an unlimited supply of kerosene.

When Leiningen reached this stage in his reasoning he felt for the first time since the arrival of the ants that his confidence was failing him. A disagreeable uneasiness crept under his skin. He loosened his collar: nasty prospect, to be eaten alive! And there

wasn't a chance in hell for him and his men once the devils got across the trench.

For the third time the kerosene was burned down to extinction. For the fourth time it flowed into the trench again. It was obvious, however, that this meant only the postponement of death, not its prevention. A few of the peons began to pray; others, cursing insanely, fired their revolvers against the black masses, as if such desperate actions could have changed the situation.

L EININGEN flogged his brain till it reeled. Was there nothing on earth which could put an end to this apparition from hell? Yes, one hope remained: to dam the river completely so that its waters would fill not only the ditch but overflow into the entire gigantic basin in which the settlement lay at the edge of the hills. The ranch house stood upon rising ground. Since its foundations were higher than the top of the dam along the river, the flood would not reach it, and there was no fear of the ants being swept up to it. Any remaining ants trying to save themselves up the slope could be repulsed by kerosene.

It was possible—yes, if one could only get to the dam. A distance of nearly two miles lay between the ranch house and the weir—two miles of ants. Would any of the Indians undertake such a risk? Hardly; and even if he did, it would be almost impossible for him to succeed. No, there was only one thing for it: he would have to make the attempt himself. What, after all, would he risk? Nothing more than he had already risked hundreds of times: his life. He had claimed that one could get out of any disagreeable situation if only one knew how to use one's brain. Well, that alone was not enough; if necessary, one had also to be a man—man enough to take the danger by the horns and to run through two miles of man-eating ants.

The ants were building their bridges. Leiningen got up on a chair. "Hey, boys, listen to me!" His voice brought the men around him; they came from all four sides of the ditch. In their despair, in the listlessness with which they already accepted death as inevitable, every word from the boss seemed to them the harbinger of a new chance of salvation. Silently they pressed about the planter.

"Listen, fellows!" Leiningen continued. "There's still one chance of saving our lives

by flooding the plantation from the river. I've got you into this mess, and I'll get you out of it. The moment I'm over the ditch, set fire to the kerosene. That'll allow time for the flood to do the trick. And then wait for me, till I come back. I'll come back, trust me"—he grinned—"even if I have to go through a slimming cure on the way."

He pulled on high leather boots, drew heavy gauntlet gloves over his hands, and stuffed the spaces between boots and breeches, between gloves and arms, between shirt and neck, with rags soaked in kerosene. A close-fitting pair of mosquito goggles protected his eyes. Finally, he stuffed cotton in his nostrils and ears and had his clothes drenched in kerosene.

*He started off toward the northwest corner of the trench. With a huge bound he was over—he landed among the ants.

The besieged men had no opportunity of watching Leiningen's race against death. The ants had once more arrived at the inner bank, and the kerosene ring stood in flames again. For the fourth time that day the reflection from the fire shone on the sweating faces of the imprisoned men and on the reddish-black armor of their merciless oppressors.

Leiningen ran. He ran with long, regular strides, with only one thought in mind: he must get through! He dodged all trees and shrubs; except for the split seconds his soles touched the ground the ants should have no opportunity to get at him. Not until he had reached halfway did he feel ants under his clothes and a few on his face. In his stride he struck at them, almost mechanically; he was scarcely conscious of their bites. He saw that he was drawing appreciably nearer to the weir—the distance grew less and less, sank to five hundred, three, two, one hundred yards.

Then he was at the weir and gripped the ant-shrouded wheel. Hardly had he seized it when a horde of infuriated ants flowed over his hands, arms, and shoulders. He started the wheel—before he had turned it once the swarm covered his face. Leiningen turned the wheel like mad, his lips pressed tight. Whenever he opened his mouth to draw breath, a few of the revolting insects tried to slip in between his lips; he had to keep his teeth closed to prevent them from getting at his tongue and his gums. He turned and turned. The barrier sank down

toward the bottom of the river. The water gushed into the ditch. The flooding of the plantation had begun.

Leiningen let go the wheel. Now for the first time he realized he was coated from head to foot with ants. In spite of the kerosene, his clothes were full of them; more than enough had found their way to his body, others were clinging to his face. Now that he had carried out his task he began to feel the torment caused by the bites of hundreds of insects sawing and boring at his flesh. For an instant he was tempted to plunge into the river if only to rid himself of the torment. To be eaten by the *pirayas*?

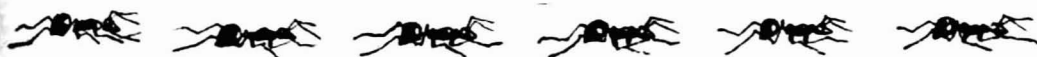
While he was already running again he tossed ants from his gloves and jacket, brushed them from his bleeding face, squashed them to death under his clothes. One of the creatures was clinging to his face right beside the rim of his goggles. He managed to tear it away, but the agony of the bite and its corroding acid penetrated to the eye nerves. His vision seemed impeded by fiery circles surrounded by milky fog; for a time he ran almost blinded, trying desperately not to trip and fall. His heart pounded painfully and irregularly, his lungs were compressed as by a giant fist. The burning girdle of kerosene toward which he was running appeared infinitely far away. A stone in his path—the planter stumbled, fell. He tried to rise, but felt as if he were pinned under a rock which made any move-

ment impossible. Something, however, that seemed outside him dragged him to his feet with superhuman power. He stood. He began to run again.

Through the blazing ring hurtled an apparition which collapsed on the ground on the other side of the ditch: Leiningen. At the moment he touched the ground, having achieved his goal, he lost consciousness, for the first time in his life. He looked frightful. The peons rushed up to him, stripped off his clothes, tore away the ants from his body which looked like a single, open, bleeding wound. In some places deep holes had been eaten into his flesh; in others the bones were showing. They carried him into the ranch house.

When the curtain of fire sank to the ground, the men saw, instead of the ilimitable host of ants that had been waiting there half an hour ago, a wide expanse of water. Imprisoned between water and fire, the ants had been delivered up to the annihilation whose tool they had so often been. At the lower end of the ditch, at the place where the river dam had its second gap, the new lake flowed back into the river, sweeping along the lost armies to vanish forever.

Leiningen lay on his bed, swathed in bandages from head to foot. With herbs and ointments they had stopped the bleeding and dressed his wounds. "He won't die," said the old Indian who had bandaged him, "he doesn't want to."



"GROSSRAUM" MEDICINE

The East Asiatic Medical Congresses which take place about once a year in the various countries of East Asia are in charge of keeping the peoples of the *Grossraum* of Greater East Asia healthy. The exchange of scientific knowledge, dealing particularly with the problems of tropical diseases, continue the tradition of former tropical congresses in East Asia. The first two congresses met in Tokyo and Manila, and for next year Hsinking has been chosen as the meeting place. It may be regarded as an outstanding success that, in the midst of war and the present difficult conditions, a congress of this kind could assemble this year in China, with delegates from all countries concerned participating.

The Congress was officially opened in Nanking but, except for the first day, it met in Shanghai.

Nineteen delegates, headed by Prof. Dr. Haruo Hayashi of Tokyo, came from Japan; twenty-eight from North China; nineteen from Manchoukuo; two from Burma; two from the Philippines; three from Thailand; and one delegate represented French Indo-China. Two German physicians were invited as honorary delegates. In addition to the delegates of the various countries, most Shanghai physicians, many doctors of the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy, and a large number of medical students participated in the Congress.

The Congress was opened by a lecture by Dr. Lu Yun Chi, the Director General of the National Health Administration of the Chinese Government, which was followed by a long list of lectures. These were subdivided into three sections running parallel. Section 1 dealt with tuberculosis; Sec-